

## **PRESS RELEASE**

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
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### **VERDICT RETURNED IN ALIEN SMUGGLING CONSPIRACY CASE**

**PHOENIX, ARIZONA** -- The United States Attorney's Office for the District of Arizona announced that on December 16, 2003, Luis Carlos Leon-Mendez, was found guilty of Harboring Illegal Alien and Conspiracy to Harbor Illegal Aliens by a federal jury at Phoenix, Arizona. Leon-Mendez's three co-defendants, Jose Angel Rangel-Quinones, Pastor Saucedo-Lopez and Joel Saul Acosta-Chavez all had previously pled guilty to smuggling charges and are awaiting sentencing.

The evidence at trial showed that a group of approximately 15 Mexican nationals contracted to be brought to the United States for \$1500 each. Their fees were to be paid once they reached their final destination. Saucedo-Lopez, guided the group through the desert then drove them to a stash house in Phoenix, where he left them with a guard. The next day, a group of armed men forced entry into the stash house and kidnapped the group of undocumented aliens, taking them at gunpoint to a second location, an apartment at 4023 W. Hadley Street in Phoenix. When they arrived at the apartment, the aliens saw two men believed to be other smugglers who had been tied up, blindfolded and beaten. The aliens were kept all together in one bedroom for approximately one week and had to ask permission to

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use the bathroom or get water. They were guarded by Acosta-Chavez, and were threatened that if their families didn't pay their smuggling fees immediately to the smugglers in Phoenix that they would be left in the desert or have a hand or foot cut off.

On August 11, 2003, Leon-Mendez, along with Rangel-Quinones and Saucedo-Lopez, came to the apartment and picked up a family whose smuggling fees presumably had been paid. They all came into the bedroom where the aliens were being kept, and the aliens observed them all to have handguns. Just after they arrived, Phoenix Police also arrived at the apartment because of a call they received from relatives of some of the aliens being held captive. Officers positioned themselves around the apartment and observed Leon-Mendez and three other Hispanic males escort the family out of the apartment to a waiting blue Thunderbird sedan. Officers then arrested the four suspects (later identified as Leon-Mendez and his co-defendants) and secured the 15 aliens who were in the car and inside the apartment, some of which required medical attention for dehydration. The defendant testified at trial that he had simply met Rangel-Quinones and Saucedo-Lopez that day in a park and gave them a ride to the apartment, but never went inside the apartment. However, the aliens who had been held captive at the apartment testified at trial that they had seen Leon-Mendez and the others inside the apartment both on August 11<sup>th</sup> and on several other occasions prior to that day, with each other and with several other smugglers who were not present when the four suspects were arrested.

During subsequent searches of the suspects and the apartment, officers and immigration agents discovered three firearms and other evidence of a smuggling operation having been run out of the apartment, including wire transfer records, numerous cell phones, and a shrine that had been erected to a saint who has been adopted by alien smugglers as their patron saint.

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The case was tried before United States District Court Judge Earl H. Carroll on December 9, 2003 through December 16, 2003. The defendant is being held pending sentencing which is scheduled to take place on March 1, 2003. Defendant faces a maximum sentence of ten years in prison and a maximum fine of \$250,000 on both charges. The investigation leading to the guilty verdict was conducted by the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement. The prosecution is being handled by Mary Beth Phillips, Assistant United States Attorney, District of Arizona, Phoenix, Arizona.

CASE NUMBER: CR-03-940-PHX-EH C  
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